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# AIRGRAM

DEPARTMENT OF STATE

6-11-37/11-862  
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A-489  
NO.

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AIR POUCH 237  
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TO : Department of State

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ANALYSIS  
DISTRIBUTION  
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FROM : Embassy BRUSSELS

DATE: NOVEMBER 3, 1962

SUBJECT : Assessment of Belgian Reaction to the Cuban Crisis.

REF : Embtel 604

EMBASSY-UNIT MESSAGE

## I. GENERAL

In general, the Belgian reaction to the United States policy in the Cuban crisis was better and more favorable to the United States than might have been expected, with points of criticism noted below (Section II). Expressions of support were received from a large number of serious and influential Belgians, including Liberal opposition leader, Baron KROMACKER, and other politicians of the Catholic and Socialist Parties.

Since the Belgians believe that the crisis has resolved itself, for the time being at least, along lines considered highly satisfactory, the net result was a gain for United States diplomacy. If it had resulted in hostilities, however, many of the Belgians who were loud in praise of the United States would probably have been highly critical. Unquestionably, in all sections of Belgian opinion there was deep worry and fear to the effect that a third world war might be imminent, and this sentiment has led to a lingering belief in some circles that the "moderation" KHRUSHCHEV displayed in the later stages of the crisis forgave the actions which the Russians took that precipitated the crisis. In the stores there was a "run" on certain commodities and clearly "ordinary people" were deeply apprehensive. (This is not unusual in Belgium which has twice been "occupied" by the enemy in this century and indeed during the Berlin crisis last year there was a similar run on food stores.)

There are no indications so far that Belgian politicians or government leaders have drawn the inference that the Cuban crisis should result

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in Belgium making a greater effort to strengthen Western defenses, and certainly thus far no Belgian governmental or political leader has urged an increased Belgian contribution to NATO defenses. (The Belgian military services participated in the NATO "alert" preparations, but there was no publicity about this fact.) There was at first a disposition to believe that the Cuban crisis was of United States concern alone. Subsequently, as the seriousness of the crisis penetrated, many Belgians became apprehensive for themselves and for Europe. As the crisis lifted, only the more perceptive fully realized that the United States leadership and strength had perhaps had the effect of deterring the Soviets from further miscalculations that could result in thermuclear war.

To the man in the street, the United States showed itself strong, resourceful, and moderate - and able by itself to meet the crisis which arose. Although there has been, from the public affairs point of view, a tremendous gain in appreciation of United States leadership among rank and file Belgians, it will be no less difficult than before to convince ordinary Belgians that they have a role to play in Western defense and Western policy making.

## II. SECTORS OF CRITICISM

An analysis of the Embassy's mail during the last two weeks reveals very few letters of criticism. Apart from the Communist Party of Brussels, the Socialist Young Guard, the Movement of the 8th of May (which is a collection of groups interested in peace), three small veterans organizations expressing general pacifist sentiments and several mimeographed sheets prepared by the Communist students of the University of Brussels, there is no critical comment of any kind except for a few letters from private citizens. Certain Eastern European refugee groups wrote to the Embassy indicating their strong support of the United States position.

There was only one full-scale public meeting on the Cuban crisis (Embassy's A-459). The meeting addressed by Raymond SCHEYVEN (brother of the Belgian Ambassador to the United States), Charles MOUREAUX, Senator ROLIN and others had an attendance of about 1500 people and was preceded by various small rallies of the Brussels students. Scheyven was particularly critical of the United States. The extreme left-wing journal, La Gauche, is organizing two smaller meetings later this week.

Embassy officers in conversation with various Socialist and left-wing Catholic intellectuals during the past two days have, of course, encountered sentiments critical of the United States position based upon the continuing belief in these circles that as a capitalist country the United States is intent upon the destruction of the Castro "revolution" and that the United States is in some way responsible for the drift of the Castro revolution into extremism and Communism. In almost every discussion along these lines, it appears that this position critical of the United States is not in fact derived from the quarantine measures announced against the Soviet bases, but is founded upon notions derived from the past which were given a strong stimulus by the Bay of Pigs affair. If the critic concerned is reasonable, he can be dissuaded by a careful

analysis of the recent Cuban crisis and in some cases has, in fact, admitted that the President's pledge not to invade Cuba if offensive weapons are removed has destroyed completely the foundation of the argument based upon our alleged hostility to Castro. If the critic is too deeply imbued with Marxism or is basically inherently anti-American, no reasonable argument will have any effect. The Embassy's consensus is that certainly some residue of criticism along these lines will remain in liberal intellectual circles for some time, but that it would be erroneous to over-estimate its strength or to exaggerate its importance. However, this type of thinking has had considerable influence among students who were excited and generally opposed the United States policy of quarantine.

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The "legal critics" of the United States position received more widespread attention, however, because of the gratuitous manner in which the President of the Senate, Paul STRUYE, took it upon himself to define United States action as illegal both in a public announcement and in his weekly column in La Libre Belgique (Embassy's A-427). As president of the Senate and as a self-appointed spokesman in foreign affairs, Struye commands considerable attention, particularly since he is a conservative Catholic; Communists and left-wingers were happy to exploit his criticism of the United States as "evidence" that even conservatives were angry with the United States. (He was extensively quoted by Moscow radio broadcasts to Western Europe.) Similar comments concerning the "illegality" of the United States measures were made by the Socialist leader of the Senate, Henri SOLIN, who is a fuzzy intellectual long cultivated by the Communists and at heart a neutralist.

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Friendly observers have told the Ambassador that much of this criticism concerning the legal aspects could have been avoided if the Department's legal explanation, which [ ] described as "reasonably good," had been available immediately at the time the quarantine measures were announced. By the time the United States legal position was finally made public, certain international experts were already frozen in their position and unwilling to admit that their initial view was erroneous. This point is of particular importance because the Rio Treaty is not well known to Europeans and the basis which it provided for the United States measures had not been grasped at the outset. [ ] others believe our failure to explain the legal basis of our action at the outset was our most serious omission. (see raftel).

bc1

As for the consultation point, this remains a grievance, although to a much lesser degree, with those who are naturally critical of the United States or excessively sensitive. The Government eventually understood that the realities of the situation precluded a protracted period of consultation possible in a less urgent matter. We do know that the prospect of further steps without consultation preoccupied Spaak to a considerable extent. Informed political leaders also did not seriously protest after the initial shock, once it had been made clear that the crisis had been deliberately provoked by the Russians and that their action seriously compromised the great American nuclear deterrent on which Europe's security so heavily depends. [ ] who was originally much disturbed, is a good example in this respect, for after talking

with the Ambassador he switched from this view.) Nevertheless, some quarters will continue to suspect that the United States did not consult its allies because it feared restraint. The Belgians, who are innately very cautious, will certainly hope that the United States will not adopt the practice of deciding upon important measures involving the peace of the world without the maximum consultation possible among allies.

### III. EMBASSY TECHNIQUES IN HANDLING THE PROBLEM

In addition to the diplomatic activity necessary to keep the Government informed and sympathetic to United States positions, a major effort was made to handle public relations aspects lest trends of opinion unfavorable to the United States develop and become dominant. Such trends could easily have developed because of the surprise caused by the President's announcement and the sketchy reporting in the initial stages of the Belgian press (due in large part to the time difference). Those papers that did comment initially, jumped to the conclusion that the American measures were based in large part upon election concerns and in some sections of the press and public, there was a general vague impression to the effect that the United States was "doing something about Castro." These unhappy beliefs were in some cases stimulated by unhelpful articles appearing in the American press which were quickly picked up here.

To counteract these dangers, the Embassy engaged in the widest possible dissemination (in both French and Flemish) of the President's speech and other related documents. Besides distribution to the press, radio and television outlets, personal letters were written from the Ambassador to 25 leading opinion molders outlining the United States position and drawing the attention of these influential potential critics and allies to certain salient points in the United States position. Material supporting the legal basis for our action was distributed as soon as it became available. Particular effort was made to ensure that the material distributed was distributed as rapidly as possible and organized and presented in such a manner that it would be read, i.e., with outlined summaries drawing the attention of individuals to key points. With liberal intellectuals, Ambassador Stevenson's speeches to the United Nations were featured, for example, not only because of the intrinsic merit of these speeches themselves, but also because of his high reputation in liberal circles.

A major and in some cases very successful effort to influence and ensure better press understanding was an Ambassadorial off-the-record background briefing of representatives of key press and radio services. By this means, the United States position was explained in detail in a manner designed to meet the critical points which the Embassy had observed cropping up in various press stories. Particular emphasis was laid upon the fact that the Cuban crisis was a Soviet-inspired crisis, with implications just as much for Europeans as for Americans which must be met by a strong and united West as a whole. The relationship between the Cuban affair and Berlin was brought out by this means, as well as the fact that serious formal warnings had earlier been given by the United States to the Russians about installing offensive weapons in the Cuban bases. In a country like Belgium where the press is relatively absorbed in

local affairs and where information concerning matters as remote geographically as Cuba is apt to be sketchy, such a briefing is important. The results proved that it was worthwhile. Detailed articles appeared in a majority of leading papers, in some instances reversing trends noted in earlier stories. In some cases, without attribution being given, the United States position was set forth in a way which had not previously been done.

The Embassy believes that its efforts to influence favorably public opinion were generally successful (although the gap concerning the legal basis for the United States position remains). The editor of a leading paper told Embassy officers that the Embassy's work had enabled it clearly "to dominate the trend of opinion here." One group of intellectual recipients of the documentation told the Embassy that through reading of the documents received they had been prevented from forming an unfavorable view of the United States position. The speed with which USIS produced the material involved was commented on favorably from several quarters. Obviously no local press effort could have been successful without the base of a splendidly documented, tightly drawn and clearly set forth public position received from the Department, USIA and the other Washington agencies concerned.

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

The lingering concern over the "legality" of the United States measures and the clear evidence that much of the praise of our position arose from the fact that it was successful, indicate that a considerable segment of Belgian opinion still basically considers itself divorced from United States concern over Cuba and Soviet actions there. If more Belgians had grasped immediately the extent of the Soviet threat to the West in its Cuban bases, there would have been less quibbling as to whether the United States was acting "legally" or "illegally."

Perhaps this is the point most worthy of retention - in possible future actions involving Cuba, the relation of Cuban developments to the West as a whole should be more strongly emphasized from the beginning. Also, if any further action is required, it is of over-riding importance that from the very beginning it be portrayed as an action undertaken by the Organization of American States acting in unison rather than an independent United States act taken unilaterally and without consultation. The Ambassador's briefing of the press and the Gridiron material subsequently received made major contributions in this respect. (Spaak and his close associates are an obvious exception to this characterization of some Belgian opinion.)

As for the pro-Castro ideologues, this problem is not overly worrying except for the students. The chronology enclosed with CA-4162 has much useful material and the Embassy is making and will make a serious effort to present a more balanced view of United States opinions and actions relating to the Castro regime than that available from the popular American press. In Belgium, for the United States to draw a distinction between Soviet actions in Cuba and Cuban actions as such which we find distasteful enhances public understanding and an active sense of sharing United States concerns about the implications of Cuba for the West as a whole.

For the Ambassador:

*Margaret Joy Tibbets*  
Margaret Joy Tibbets  
First Secretary of Embassy